

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE C7

THE WASHINGTON POST  
17 February 1980

*Jack Anderson*

# A Tough Editor and a Gang of Toughs

In the honky-tonk border town of Tijuana, Mexican government officials, enraged by a newspaper called ABC and its stories of widespread corruption, wreaked the kind of revenge against their tormentor that Richard Nixon and his associates could only dream about.

Last November, a gang of 250 toughs from a government-controlled labor union stormed into the ABC news offices and took possession. The paper was shut down.

When ABC eventually resumed publication, it wasn't the same newspaper. Editor Jesus Blancornelas and his staff of fiercely independent investigative reporters had been replaced by hacks certified as loyal to the government.

The takeover of ABC and ouster of its staff were flagrant violations of the press freedom guaranteed by Mexico's progressive constitution. The more characteristic method used to ensure favorable press is simple bribery—with public money.

Blancornelas, however, refused to accept the payola. On the contrary, he dared to write a series of articles about Baja California Gov. Roberto de la Madrid, a lifelong friend of Mexican President José López Portillo.

Among the embarrassing things Blancornelas printed about the governor were that he had put 28 members of his family on the government payroll, that he had let his campaign manager avoid millions in taxes on butane gas imported from the United States and that he had purchased four airplanes with government funds and permitted his relatives to use them on vacation junkets to Acapulco.

The governor's response was to call the gutsy editor "an insect." The government official added ominously: "We all know how to get rid of insects—with insecticide."

Poisonous stories were leaked to government-controlled newspapers, falsely labeling Blancornelas a CIA agent, a Ku Klux Klan member and a homosexual.

The building that housed ABC was suddenly sold to a good friend of the governor. Blancornelas was not given the option of buying the building,

though that is required by Mexican law. Advertisers canceled their contracts under pressure from the government, sources told my associate Gary Cohn. The Tijuana Chamber of Commerce instituted a boycott of the newspaper.

When this harassment failed to silence Blancornelas, the government-backed union goons seized the newspaper offices while police looked on.

Driven out by force, the scrappy editor started a newsletter called ABC-Two, which had a brief success until printers in Tijuana, under pressure from the government, refused to print the publication.

Still, Blancornelas refused to say uncle. In self-imposed exile in the United States, he is now trying to raise money for another independent newspaper.

The Washington-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs has been assisting Blancornelas in his efforts. Apparently as a result of this support, a Mexican military intelligence agent made a special trip from Mexico City to Washington to investigate COHA and its director, Larry Birns.

Unfortunately, Blancornelas isn't the first independent journalist to feel the wrath of high Mexican officials. In 1976, for instance, then-president Luis Echeverría was directly responsible for ousting the editorial staff of the respected Mexico City daily Excelsior because it opposed the president's stand on a resolution in the United Nations.

All this happened despite the supposedly ironclad protection guaranteed the press by the Mexican constitution.

In the United States, the independence of the media is being threatened by subtler legal means—Supreme Court decisions that interpret First Amendment protections out of existence. The guiding spirit behind the court's attacks on the press—Chief Justice Warren Burger—has not yet called newsmen "insects," though he has referred to critical reporters as "a bunch of pipsqueaks."

It can't happen here? Don't be too sure.